WHOSE MAGIC?

—An Interpretation of K. A. Porter's "Magic"—

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"Magic" by Katherine Anne Porter is a short story of only five pages, but it has been variously estimated by critics since its first publication in 1928. Yvor Winters, for example, says, "['Magic'] is a static sketch of the brothel, the beating, the departure, the charm, the return. It is a good sketch, but it is nothing more."[1] Harry Mooney, who has a similar opinion of the work, expresses a slightly higher estimation saying that "'Magic' is at most a sketch, but it is a nearly perfect thing of its kind."[2] William Nance, however, presents a different reading of the story regarding it as "the extreme example of her early experimental and highly objective approach" and as "a minor technical masterpiece."[3] Furthermore, George Hendrick, after making a close analysis of the story in his *Katherine Anne Porter*, concludes that "this story of five pages is of great complexity" and calls it "a major achievement" which is "too little appreciated."[4]

This divergence of opinion is due to their interpretation of the whole story—whether it is a simple narrated sketch (Winters and Mooney), or a complex story of social criticism (Nance), or that of point of view (Hendrick)—though the latter two opinions seem to be prevalent recently. It is true that "Magic" is, at face value, a simple story in which a maid tells a story of magic performed in a brothel while brushing her mistress' hair. Upon closer reading, however, we notice many debatable points such as the narrator-maid's strange style, the abrupt insertion of Madame Blanchard's complaint, the unsatisfying ending, and a strange tone of irony prevailing throughout the whole story. Moreover, comparison of several editions of "Magic" shows a considerable number of alterations in punctuation and wording, and these changes seem to be made with a certain intention. In this paper,

therefore, I should try to understand the meaning of the short story by examining the alterations and the strange style, and by discussing the narrator-maid's role.

Six editions of "Magic" are at present available to me, and they may be roughly classified into three categories according to the differences of the texts. The first group consists of two versions: a reprint of *Transition* of 1928 where "Magic" first appeared,[5] and the one included in an anthology, *Transition Workshop* (1949).[6] There are six minor changes between these two texts such as: a grammatical correction (pot of this girls→pot of this girl's); an orthographical change (toe nails→toenails); and addition of commas (it is a business you see like any other→it is a business, you see, like any other). Since these alterations are relatively small, I should like to use first *Transition* edition as the representative text of the first group. Three editions in the second group are: Modern Library edition (1935),[7] Harcourt hard cover edition (1958),[8] and Harcourt Harvest Book paper back edition (1958).[9] Since these three editions are identical in wording and punctuation, I will choose the Modern Library edition when I refer to the second group. To the third category belongs Jonathan Cape edition (1967).[10] This edition is the same in wording as the editions of the second group, but its orthography and punctuation are British, and the greatest difference from the previous editions is that all the representative speeches in the maid's narration are turned into direct speeches with single quotation marks.

Between the first group of editions and the second group there is a remarkable difference in wording and punctuation. The Modern Library edition proves to be more effective in expression than the *Transition* edition. For example, the author makes a stronger effect by adding words (I worked very hard→I worked very hard all hours; girls stayed →girls stayed on), by eliminating weak words (yes, I think that was the way→yes, that was the way; madam began then to shout→madam began to shout), and by changing general words to more specific words (box→puff; saw a lot of things→saw too many things). The author

also creates a comical effect by over-emphasizing the statement (they cannot say why→they cannot say why: even your enemy will come back to you believing you are his friend).

Changes in punctuation include addition of commas and quotation marks, and capitalization. In the Modern Library edition, representative speeches in the maid's tale are clarified by commas and capitalization: (the girl said keep your hands off→the girl said, Keep your hands off; morning, I will leave→morning, Now I will leave). In the latter case, by adding the word "Now", the author makes clear the beginning of a representative speech, because the personal pronoun "I" is always capitalized in English. The maid's interjections during her tale are also distinguished from the main body of the narration by punctuation and capitalization (it was the way she fought, my good heavens Madame Blanchard→it was the way she fought. My good heavens, Madame Blanchard), and in order to distinguish Madame Blanchard's utterances from the speeches of other characters in the maid's story, quotation marks are newly added (Madame Blanchard said, You are pulling a little here, and eased a strand of hair: and then what?→Madame Blanchard said, "You are pulling a little here," and eased a strand of hair: "and then what?").

These changes in punctuation in the Modern Library edition have the effect of separating the maid's remarks addressed to Madame Blanchard and Madame Blanchard's utterances from the maid's tale and the speeches of the characters in the tale. In other words, the alteration makes a distinction between the world of the maid and Madame Blanchard, and that of the madam and Ninette and the cook in the maid's tale. In this sense, the Jonathan Cape edition which provides all the speeches with quotation marks almost negates the effect of distinction obtained in the revised version of the Modern Library edition. I have no means to ascertain whether this was the author's intention or not, but it seems to weaken the impact of the story. In relation to the separation of the two worlds, the change of a single word "these" in "she [i. e. Ninette] gave these back to the madam" to "those" may help to indicate the

remoteness of the world in the maid's tale from that of Madame Blanchard.

Another significant change in the Modern Library edition is the addition of a phrase, "the same clothes and all" to the description of Ninette when she returned to the brothel after magic had been performed. This addition considerably increases the reader's doubt about the effectiveness and credibility of the cook's magic, because it suggests the possibility that the girl came back on account of fatigue and hunger, and not of the dubious magic.

"Magic" is almost like the "dramatic monologue" in Robert Browning's poems with the exception of Madame Blanchard's occasional interruptions, and the role of the narrator-maid may be as important as that of the duke in "My Last Duchess" by Browning. As for the maid's narration, the first characteristic we notice is its peculiar style, which seems to be strongly French flavored. Since the maid is a half-breed of Negro and French living in New Orleans, it is quite likely that the awkward style is the imitation of the Creole dialect. The study of the Creole language in New Orleans, however, is beyond the scope of this paper, and I should like to limit the discussion to the tracing of French elements in the maid's speech.

There are some French words and names such as "sou marqué," Madame Blanchard, and Ninette. Some non-standard English phrasing in the maid's talk can be considered as the literal translation of French phrases and sentences. Take the words "man friend," for instance. They may be from French "un ami." Other unnatural English words and expressions can be interpreted in French (her room where I was making clean→sa chambre où je faisais le ménage; the thing recalled to me→cette chose me rappelais; if you wish to hear→si vous vouliez entendre; by habit→par habitude, or d'habitude). Moreover, the strange word order in her speech fits French syntax. For example, the unusual position of the adverb "always" in "I work always where there is work to be had" is natural in French as in "je travaille toujour...." Also the repetition of proper noun and personal pronoun as in "So Ninette, this

girl, she said" is quite common in French: "Donc Ninett, cette fille, elle dit."

The first conceivable reason why the maid's narration is strongly affected by French is that the author wants to create an exotic atmosphere suitable for the story which takes place in New Oleans where French influence is still apparent. Another reason, which is probably more important, is to give the maid a certain personality providing her with her background of a Negro-French half-breed living in New Orleans.

The previous discussion of the revision and style shows the separation of the two worlds in the story and the characterization of the maid-narrator, and both are closely related to the function of the maid-narrator in "Magic". The maid-narrator occupies the central position in the whole story as the medium between the separated worlds of Madame Blanchard and of the fancy house, and the characterization makes her a major character with a striking personality. These are also the symptoms of a typical point-of-view story. Most critics who regard "magic" as the story of point of view, like Austin Wright, take the view that "the hair dresser seems to believe that the prostitute was brought back to the brothel by a magic spell, but the reader knows better."[11] Hendrick similarly says that the narrator-maid "was never aware of the ironies involved" (Hendrick, p. 94). In the story of point of view, the crucial problem is the fallibility of the narrator, and the maid-narrator in "Magic" seems to belong to a different type of viewpoint character from the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw* and the editor in *The Aspern Papers* both by Henry James. The maid is more like the writer of "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift, because she seems to know better than the naive narrator of Henry James.

The maid in "Magic" is a sensitive, clever woman. She is always carefully watching her mistress' response to her tale and is able to react to it quickly. For example, the maid forces her mistress' attention to her tale by adressing her twenty-one times in the first three pages inserting such words as "Madame," "Madame Blanchard," "you see," and "you know," but as the tale becomes interesting and the Madame's

attention is chained to it, the maid ceases to address her mistress. In fact, after the cook enters the tale, the maid never says "Madame Blanchard" nor uses the word "you" addressing her mistress, because there is practically no need for such stimulation. The maid definitely knows what she is doing. As Hendrick says, she is "acutely aware of her role as an entertainer" (Hendrick, p. 93), but she is not a mere entertainer. Apparently the maid's job is to tell an interesting story so that her mistress may sit still while she brushes her hair. Since Madame Blanchard complains only once before the tale becomes really absorbing, she has obviously enjoyed the tale, and as the brushing is completed, simultaneously ends the tale. The maid, therefore, has succeeded in telling a fascinating story as well as in keeping her mistress quiet during the brushing. The reason why she ends the tale abruptly is that she has no use for the tale once the brushing is done.

The maid, however, does more than that. From the beginning of her narration, she is trying hard to give her mistress a good impression saying, "And, Madame Blanchard, believe that I am happy to be here with you and your family because it is so serene, everything." If we read the whole story on the hypothesis that the maid is doing self-advertizement, we find many remarks that suggest her goodness. Let me quote a few such lines supplementing them with my reading of implications in parentheses: "I work always where there is work to be had.... I worked very hard all hours (I am such a hard and willing worker); the girl fell back again into her room.... I helped her to her bed (How nice of me!); the cook in that place was a woman, colored like myself, like myself with much French blood just the same (I have much French blood in me like you, Madame Blanchard)." To summarize, she is hinting that she is a hard-working, kind-hearted, French-blooded, good woman without making it sound too obvious. The maid is a smart woman who can entertain her mistress while advertizing herself.

The matter, however, does not seem to be so simple, because if we take the maid's narration only as a self-advertizement, we find some statements in which she contradicts herself. Especially, when the maid

describes the cook at the brothel saying that "she had a very hard heart, she helped the madam in everything, she liked to watch all that happened, and she gave away tales on the girls," it sounds as if the maid herself is a woman who "had a very hard heart" because she helps Madame Blanchard (as in hair brushing) and she likes to watch all that happens ("I saw too many things"), and she gives away tales on the girls (as she does now). In other words, she and the cook have too many things in common to ignore the existence of some kind of relation between them. The only difference the maid emphasizes is the fact that the cook "had a very hard heart" and all the other qualities of the cook correspond with the maid's.

Before going into the discussion of this problem further, I should like to raise a question in connection with the problem of the maid and the cook. Why has the maid chosen the story of the brothel and the magic? Before she starts the tale, she says to her mistress, "You'll excuse me too but I could not help hearing you say to the laundress maybe someone had bewitched your linens, they fall away so fast in the wash," and again in the middle of her tale she repeats that "the thing recalled to me when you said your linens were bewitched." This may have reminded her of the story of magic, but the repetition of the reason makes the reason less plausible, and makes it sound more like an excuse than an honest answer. I suspect there might be other reasons for the choice of the story. The story may be "a dramatic version of what happened" (Hendrick, p. 94), or it may be an utter fiction, but I should like to figure out what has made the maid choose the tale, and what she gains by telling the story of magic.

It is quite plausible that the maid has picked the tale simply because it is a wild story of violence and magic that is sure to attract her mistress, but there is also the possibility that she has adopted it with the intention of expressing her feelings and opinions. It is the cook who most resembles the maid as I have discussed, and when we think of the two worlds contrasted more clearly by revision, we notice a parallel between the maid/Madame Blanchard relationship and the

cook/the madam one. The relationship in each group is that of the servant and the master as the cook "helped the madam in everything," and the maid has to brush her mistress' hair. The cook accordingly practices the black art in order to fulfill the madam's wish, but the problem is how effective the magic is, and the addition of "the same clothes and all" in the Modern Library edition definitely increases the doubt about the power of the magic, and it may hint the possible secret communication between the cook and Ninette. Then who is the one laid under the spell of the dubious magic? Certainly the maid is too smart to be fooled by it. That leaves only the madam of the fancy house. It is the madam who follows the directions of the cook and is made to spit in the pot to perfect the magic. The madam does not question Ninette when she returns, because the madam is firmly convinced that the magic has worked. The madam is the only one who is under the spell.

Therefore we realize that the relationship between the madam and the cook is not a simple master-servant relationship, because it is actually the cook who controls the madam. This also applies to the other set of parallel in the relationship between Madame Blanchard and the maid. It is not the Madame but the maid who stands at the vantage point in the psychological world. Actually, the maid is standing most of the time at the back of Madame Blanchard brushing her hair, and we can guess Madame Blanchard's feeling when she listens to the maid's violent story with her back to the maid if we imagine ourselves sitting in a barber's chair listening to his wild story. In this sense, the maid's choice of the violent story seems deliberate. Besides, the ironies involved and choice of words in the tale seem to be too consistent and relevant to the maid's situation to disregard as accidental.

Ironies are felt not only in the maid's tale of the brothel, but also in the narration of the whole story from its very beginning. We may interpret the contradictory remarks mentioned before as the ironical statements intended for Madame Blanchard. I should like to show some examples with my comment in parentheses. The maid says, "I am

happy to be here with you and your family because it is so serene, everything," but right after that statement, she reveals her true thought by saying, "I work always where there is work to be had" (any place will do). She says, "I saw too many things, things you wouldn't believe, and I wouldn't think of telling you" (because it is too much for a lady), but immediately she adds, (but I will tell you about it) "only it will rest you while I brush your hair" (I know you love this kind of violent, vulgar story at heart). When the maid mentions the monetary system at the brothel, she is referring to her job at Madame Blanchard's: "the girl...got her percentage, a very small little of her earnings: it is a business, you see, like any other" (just like this one between you and me, Madame). The maid's contradictory description about the cook may be understood as an ironical remark intended toward her mistress. By identifying herself with the cook as her second self, the maid may be here putting a sort of threat to Madame Blanchard: "The cook in the place was a woman, colored like myself, like myself with much French blood just the same, like myself living always among people who worked spells" (Then why can't I do the same thing? Yes, for sure, I know magic, let me tell you). It may not be too far-fetched a view to see some insinuation in making the madam of the brothel such a villain.

It is truly amazing to see how many things the maid has achieved during her narration. She has entertained her mistress, done hair brushing, advertized herself, put in ironic remarks and complaints, all at once, and she had done all these so naturally that her mistress does not notice the bitter implications in her speech, although it is likely that Madame Blanchard has felt some vague uneasiness. What the maid has done is a genuine art of "Magic".

This article is based on the report made for English 630, Dr. McCutcheon's class at University of Hawaii, and part of it was read at the Monthly Meeting of the American Literary Society, Kansai Branch, held on July 14th, 1973.

NOTES

1 Yvor Winters, "Major Fiction" in *Hound and Horn* (Ⅳ, 1931), p. 303.
2 Harry John Mooney, *The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1957), p. 51.
3 William L. Nance, *Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 15.
4 George Hendrick, *Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Twayne, 1965), p. 95.
5 Katherine Anne Porter, "Magic" in *Transition* (1928; rpt. New York; Kraus, 1967), pp. 229-31.
6 Porter, "Magic" in *Transition Workshop* ed. Eugene Jolas (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1949), pp. 111-13.
7 Porter, "Magic" in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (New York: Modern Library, 1935), pp. 39-43.
8 Porter, "Magic" in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), pp. 39-41.
9 Porter, "Magic" in *The Old Order: Stories of the South* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), pp. 97-103.
10 Porter, "Magic" in *Collected Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), pp. 46-48.
11 Austin M. Wright, *The American Short Story in the Twenties* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1961), p. 284.